

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Parenting the Next Generation

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

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NOT EVERYONE EXPERIENCES THE “GOLDEN YEARS”

in the same way. For many families, plans for an empty nest and retirement are not a reality. Today it is more common for parents to go through the transition from caring for their children to caring for their children's children. Caring for grandchildren may be permanent or temporary. It may involve an informal arrangement or legal custody or guardianship. The following examples illustrate the increasing number of grandparents being called upon to parent their grandchildren.

Ralph and Sara have been parenting their 8-year-old granddaughter Vanessa, 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.

Lynn 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. Lynn is parenting her teenage grandsons. She holds down a full-time job to make ends meet. Lynn 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 number of grandparents who provide primary care for their grandchildren is growing. A primary caregiver is someone who is responsible for meeting a child's basic needs. This includes such things as housing, food, clothing and medical care. These grandparent caregivers are parenting a second time around.

According to AARP, Montana ranked ninth in the nation for the increase in grandparents raising grandchildren between the years of 1990-2000. During this time, the number of Montana grandparents who

were raising their grandchildren grew by 53 percent. Today in Montana, 6,692 grandparents are raising their grandchildren (2005-2009 American Community Survey).

Although grandparents raising grandchildren is not new, their role as primary caregivers is a growing trend throughout the nation. Approximately 6.7 million children live in households headed by grandparents or other relatives. No parents are present in about one-third of these families. Many of these grandparents are taking on this responsibility with little or no help from others.

Reasons grandparents are raising grandchildren

Grandparents are faced with the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren for a variety of reasons. These include parental death, substance abuse, divorce, incarceration, mental health problems, teen pregnancy, abandonment, military deployment, and the involvement of social services due to child abuse or neglect. Nearly all of these families are formed due to a family crisis where the parent is unwilling or unable to care for the children. Grandparents often assume the role of parents to keep children within the family, save them from further harm, and keep them out of the foster care system.

Challenges for grandparents raising grandchildren

Generally, grandparents are called upon to parent a second time around unexpectedly. This causes challenges. Many grandparents live on a fixed income. They 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. Some have downsized to smaller housing and have limited space in their home.

Becoming a parent again can be overwhelming. 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 schools and with child care methods that have changed since they first were parents.

Grandparents raising grandchildren often deal with feelings of guilt and resentment toward their adult children for causing the reason for placement. The grandchildren have typically experienced trauma and most grandparents are not adequately prepared to handle the anger, grief and sadness the children express. Behavioral issues can be a challenge too, as the grandchildren act out because they do not understand why they cannot live with their parents.

Raising grandchildren may also cause difficulties with the other grandchildren in the family who are living with their own parents. They expect grandparents to be traditional grandparents. These family members may feel resentful towards the other grandchildren.

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 separated by distance; therefore, some grandparents and grandchildren do not have strong ties. Grandparents who take on the responsibility of their grandchildren have an opportunity to develop a close relationship with their grandchildren.

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. The grandchild can develop 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.

Since 2008, the federal Fostering Connections Act states that states must first look to kin when a child is removed from the home due to abuse and neglect. This requirement does allow grandparents to be considered as a placement for their grandchildren when the family has experienced a crisis. The grandparents can work with child and family services to keep grandchildren within the family.

Support groups

Research has found that grandparents benefit from talking with others who are in a similar situation. Grandparents find peer counseling in the form of support/education groups. These groups usually meet once or twice a month. The Montana Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Project through Montana State University Extension has developed a network of support/education groups across the state.

The purpose of support groups is to meet the needs of the grandparents who have been asked to help raise their grandchildren. Support groups offer peers to share the concerns and needs of the grandparents. The groups offer education and resources to assist with raising grandchildren without guilt or embarrassment. Grandparent support groups can encourage grandparents to take care of their own physical, mental and emotional needs. The groups can offer respite from the daily challenges of parenting a second time around.

For more information on support groups in Montana, contact the Montana State University Extension Family and Human Development Office at (406) 994-3395.

Conclusion

Becoming a parent again can be an overwhelming and challenging task. It can also be a rewarding and memorable time if resources and support are available and utilized. Support groups are being created to help this increasingly common family form be healthy and successful.

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Tips to help grandparents cope

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

Take care of yourself.

In order to care for your grandchildren you need to be in good health. Be sure you are going in for regular physical check-ups. Take any medications you may have been prescribed. Maintain a healthy diet and regular exercise. Your exercise can be a daily walk! This will help you to feel more energized and emotionally balanced.

Take a break.

If you are feeling like you could use some respite, find relief. Call on a friend, relative, or an agency in the community that provides respite care. Being a parent again takes a lot of energy. There will be times when you need some time for yourself. This may mean getting up earlier than the grandchildren to have some quiet time. You might also find time during the day when the grandchildren are away at school. Find time to do something YOU enjoy.

Seek help when you need it.

Help can come in many forms such as financial assistance, child-care assistance, spiritual advice, and support from neighbors and friends. You may find support from people who are going through the same thing as you. Contact your local office of public assistance to find financial assistance. Some Area Agencies on Aging have respite funding. Your place of worship may have resources to help.

Set limits.

Set limits for yourself and for your grandchildren. Be firm but fair with your grandchildren. Let them know you love them unconditionally. Remember that it is structure and rules that 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. Prepare a will with instructions concerning the grandchildren's care. 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.

Consult with a financial planner.

In addition to speaking with an attorney, you may want to talk to a financial planner. Issues such as inheritance, life insurance, and saving for college are important to consider. MSU Extension has numerous publications on estate planning and financial management.

Seek out sources of assistance.

If you are on a fixed income, it may be helpful to contact your local office of public assistance. Nearly all grandchildren being raised by grandparents qualify for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Child-Only grants. Your grandchildren may also qualify for the Healthy Montana Kids program, which is medical insurance. Depending upon the circumstances, you might be able to become a licensed kinship-foster parent and receive foster care payments for your grandchild.

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

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 AARP Montana office. For grandparents or for friends, teachers, and social service staff who know of grandparents raising grandchildren, the following information and Internet resources may be of assistance. For phone numbers of county 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>. *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: What to do the Second Time Around*. This guide answers many of the common questions grandparents and other relative caregivers have when they are faced with parenting a second time around.

National Extension Website for Family Caregiving

http://www.extension.org/family_caregiving. There is a special section on Raising Grandchildren. In addition there is information on the eXtension website on parenting, child care, military families, and family finances.

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

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

Generations United

www.gu.org. This advocacy organization works on family issues across the lifespan. They have a specific link to information on grandparents raising grandchildren.

Children's Defense Fund

www.childrensdefense.org. The 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.

Fostering Connections

<http://www.fosteringconnections.org/>. This site discusses the federal Fostering Connections Act and services.

Grandfamilies State Law and Policy Resource Center

<http://www.grandfamilies.org>. This is a website that was developed and maintained by several national organizations. Laws pertaining to grandparent caregivers are available from all 50 states.

Grandfamilies of America

<http://www.grandfamiliesofamerica.com/>. Grandfamilies of America is a national organization that is staffed and governed solely by relative caregivers.

Other Websites

Several states have websites 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.



To order additional publications, please contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office, visit our online catalog at www.msueextension.org/publications.asp or e-mail orderpubs@montana.edu

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