

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Are you a grandparent who has given up your retirement or your own plans in order to take on the diapers, daycare, teacher conferences, driver's ed, and everything else that comes along with raising children? Many grandparents today are stepping in to raise their grandchildren when the children's own parents are not able or willing to do so. In fact, the U.S. Census of 2000 found that over 2.4 million grandparents have responsibility for their grandchildren.

If you are one of these grandparents, you have made numerous sacrifices in order to provide a better life for your grandchildren. What are some things you can do now to provide the best possible care for your grandchildren while still preserving your own health and well-being?

Making the adjustment. Often, grandparents take on this obligation when the grandchildren's own parents abandon them or when the children can no longer live with them because of the parent's mental disorder, substance abuse, or incarceration. Thus, you may have the added burden of caring for children who suffered from abuse or neglect from their own parents. These children may feel insecure and afraid; they may be angry at their situation and even embarrassed by it. It will take time for these children to feel safe and secure. You can encourage these good feelings and ease their adjustment to their new home in a number of ways:

- ☆ Set up a daily routine of mealtimes, bedtime, and other activities so that the children have some predictability in their lives.
- ☆ Help your grandchildren to feel that they are "home" by making room for them and their belongings. Your home needs to be welcoming, safe, and child-friendly.
- ☆ Work on communication skills. Talk to your grandchildren, and make sure that the children know that they can always talk to you.
- ☆ Practice positive discipline that emphasizes education, not punishment, and that rewards good behavior with praise.
- ☆ Set up a few rules, and explain the rules to the children. Then, enforce them consistently.

Finding shared activities. Building new relationships can be difficult. Sometimes, it helps to find things that you can do with your grandchildren to nurture your relationship and to make them feel secure and happy in their new home.

- ☆ Read. Children love to hear stories, and even older children may surprise you by sitting quietly as you read aloud. Children who see you read have a better chance of becoming readers themselves.
- ☆ Get computer savvy. If you don't have your own computer, use the one at the public library. The library may have classes or other free help for you. You'll find lots of things that you and your grandchildren can do on the computer, from games to school research.
- ☆ Join a group. There are many local support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren, and a number of these groups also provide activities for the children. You might also find welcoming groups at your place of worship or in the local schools or library.
- ☆ Take up a sport or other outdoor activity. Children of all ages need to be active. Physical activity may help your grandchildren feel better and develop a healthy lifestyle, and it can be an important stress reliever for you.



Taking care of yourself. If you're feeling stressed, overwhelmed, and unhappy, you are not going to be able to provide the best care for your grandchild. It's important that you take care of yourself and not allow yourself to be overwhelmed by your parental responsibilities. Here are some suggestions:

- ☆ Find a support group—either a group specifically for grandparents raising grandchildren or some other support group where you can share your challenges with others who will understand.
- ☆ Talk to someone. This could be a friend or relative or a professional, such as a counselor, family doctor, or someone at your church or temple. Unburdening yourself can be a stress reliever.
- ☆ Take a break. A short time away from your grandchildren may give you some time to relax. Look for a trusted adult who can babysit or take over while you're out.
- ☆ Take a parenting class. A class may help you to feel more comfortable with your status as a caregiver for young children. It will also provide resources in the form of your teacher and the other students in the class.
- ☆ Learn to say "no." You don't have time to do everything. Learn to make priorities, and eliminate the unnecessary tasks in your life.

Finding resources. There is lots of useful free information for grandparents. Much of it is available on the Internet. If your computer skills are a little rusty, you can find help at your public library. Here are some places to start:

- ☆ **AARP** runs a Grandparent Information Center, where you can sign up for their newsletter, check their message board, and search for a local support group (www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/gic).
- ☆ **Generations United** runs their own National Center on Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children, which offers information and resources (www.gu.org/projg&o.htm).
- ☆ **The University of Wisconsin Extension** produced a series of factsheets titled *Through the Eyes of a Child—Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* (www.uwex.edu/relationships/).
- ☆ **The University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences** has a website that carries links to all kinds of factsheets on child development, including easy-to-understand factsheets for grandparents raising grandchildren. Go to www.fcs.uga.edu/extension/cyf_pubs.php and scroll down about halfway to find the grandparent factsheets.
- ☆ For help **in your particular State**, there is a series of factsheets that have been produced by a national partnership among the Children's Defense Fund, AARP, Casey Family Programs, National Center for Resource Family Support, Brookdale Foundation, Child Welfare League of America, Generations United, the Urban Institute, and Johnson & Hedgpeth Consultants. Go to www.childrensdefense.org/childwelfare/kinshipcare/factsheets/default.aspx

