

# When Grandparents Become Parents to Their Grandchildren

## The facts

The American Association of Retired Persons reports a 17 percent jump in the number of children cared for in grandparent-only households in one year — 1992 to 1993. This is contrasted with a gradual 6 percent rise over the prior 22 years. The Census Bureau figures that 3.4 million children are raised by grandparents or other relatives. And, 44 percent of the nation's grandparents spend 100 or more hours a year taking care of grandkids.

Clearly, grandparents are very influential in their grandchildren's lives whether they provide occasional care, live close by or far away. But what happens when grandparents assume the role of parent for their grandchildren?

Several factors come to the surface:

### ■ Attitude Adjustment.

Grandparents usually anticipate later life as a time to enjoy the privileges of grandchildren without the responsibilities. It may take some effort to adjust to the new role of caretaker, and it may mean many adjustments in life planning, from finances to career changes to location and lifestyle changes

### ■ Sense of Purpose.

Grandparents involved in raising grandchildren often report a greater sense of purpose in their own lives. Margaret Jendrek from Miami University in Ohio interviewed 114 grandparents who were providing regular care. Most were caring for only one grandchild, but some had responsibility for as many as five. Nearly all respondents were grandmothers. Jendrek identified three types of grandparents:

- *Day care grandparents*, who provide regular daily care for an extended period.



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- *“Living-with” grandparents*, who reside with a grandchild but do not have legal custody (usually the grandchild lives in the grandparent’s home).
- *Custodial grandparents*, who have obtained legal responsibility for the grandchild.

Jendrek found that grandparents were more likely to be caring for a daughter’s child than a son’s, especially in the custodial situation. Day care grandparents usually cared for very young children, while other grandparents care for children up to age 14. All three groups reported that rearing young children affected their lifestyle, friendships, family, and marriage. Nearly three-fourths of all the grandparents reported major adjustments in their routines and plans. As might be expected, custodial grandparents reported the most change. Still, more than half of all the grandparents — and nearly two thirds of the custodial ones — reported a greater sense of purpose in life *because of their caretaking responsibility.*

## **Reasons for grandparent care**

Jendrek found that the reasons for caring for a grandchild varied widely, depending on the type of care. Most day care grandparents cited the mother’s full-time work schedule, while custodial grandparents noted the mother’s emotional problems. Financial help was the most common reason given by grandparents who lived with a grandchild.

Overall, about two thirds of the grandparents had offered to provide care. “Living-with” grandparents, however, are apparently more often in a position where they simply begin to take over. In some cases, this assumption of care may develop because the child’s mother has not yet left home herself. This circumstance, as well as the fact that these grandparents do not have legal authority over the

grandchild, may help explain why living-with grandparents were found to experience more stress than the other two types of grandparents.

Nevertheless, “living-with” grandparents preferred their informal arrangement. Obtaining legal custody would involve declaring their own child an unfit parent, which takes an emotional as well as financial toll. Jendrek noted that grandparents in all three categories are committed to providing a stable family environment. They also display an ability to improvise in the face of unusual and sometimes difficult situations.

## **Need for support**

Of these three types of grandparents, those providing day care seem to function most like our society’s common definition of grandparents. But in all three arrangements, grandparents are likely to need extra support and encouragement from other family members. They may benefit as well from connecting to available social agencies and organizations in their area.

There are a variety of options available for support. Some hospitals and educational programs offer grandparenting classes to address the changing roles of grandparents. Other options might include support groups and, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) resources. Call around in your community to see what is available.

Support groups for grandparents raising grandchildren are springing up around the country. To learn how to start a group in your area write:

Mildred Horn  
Grandparents Reaching Out  
141 Glensummer Road  
Holbrook, NY 11741.

Barbara Kirkland  
Grandparents Raising Grandchildren  
P.O. Box 104  
Colleyville, TX 76034.

Grandparents Rights Organization  
Suite 600  
555 South Woodward Avenue  
Birmingham, MI 48009.

**AARP Resources are available from:**  
AARP Grandparent Information Center  
PCDD/Programs  
601 "E" Street NW  
Room B5 - 436  
Washington, DC 20049  
202/434-2288

## Legal issues

Eligibility for financial assistance, health-care coverage, social services and even housing and school enrollment may hinge on the legal relationship of a grandparent caregiver to the grandchild.

Given the bewildering array of federal, state and local laws governing child care, however, understanding the ramifications isn't easy. Moreover, regulations for "kinship care" — loosely defined as primary, residential care by relatives — are in flux as advocates seek reforms.

"While arrangements and terminology vary from state to state," says Marianne Takas of the American Bar Association, "kinship care generally falls into two categories — foster and private kinship care."

In foster kinship care, relatives become the foster parents, but the state retains custody. Until recently, children in foster care usually went to homes of nonrelatives, who received monthly child-care payments. But relatives providing similar care outside the foster-care system received no payments.

According to Dana Wilson of the Child Welfare League of America, kinship care is becoming the "preferred option," to keep children within

their own families. California, Minnesota, New Jersey, Maryland and other states have passed or are considering laws incorporating kinship care into foster-care networks. In New York City alone, the children in kinship foster care rose from 45 in 1986 to 23,600 in 1991. Although this option is chosen more often, many grandparents balk at the background checks and home reviews many states require of foster parents.

In private kinship care, custody remains with a family member. Relative caregivers are not eligible for child-care payments, although other assistance may be available. Private kinship care arrangements take various forms:

- The grandparent is caretaker, but the parent retains legal custody and can make any decisions regarding the kids.
- The grandparent has temporary legal custody, which public housing and some school districts require of caregivers. Legal custodians make decisions concerning daily care of the child, but parents are still involved in major decisions.
- The grandparent adopts the child, and rights of the birth parents are terminated. Few grandparents choose this option because it can end a relationship with your own child.

One group has proposed a legal remedy called "kinship adoption," a concept yet untested but supported by some family advocates, that keeps the door open between birth parent and child. The adopting grandparent would have parental rights, but the birth parent would stay a valued relative with a legally defined role allowing visitations or access to school records.

But many grandparents and professionals think that bending family relationships to fit legal requirements is misguided. Patricia DeMichele of AARP's Legal Counsel for the Elderly cautions that seeking custody is "costly, time consuming, intrusive and can destroy existing family relationships." Instead,

she recommends bending the requirements to fit the family. For example, insurance regulations could be changed so the primary caregiver's policy — whether the parent or grandparent — would cover the child. A durable power of attorney for the child to get necessary assistance, no matter who the caregiver is, could also be created.

### **The bottom line**

Grandparents are very important and influential people to grandchildren of all ages. As the grandparent, you may need to work at defining your new role and establishing a positive relationship with your grandchild. The circumstances that put you in this position have a big impact on how your role develops. Keep in mind that the child is not responsible for the situation and should not be put in a position of being blamed or shamed. You have an exciting opportunity to guide your grandchild to the responsible adult level you envision. For more information on the role of grandparents, ask to see other publications in this series.

### **References**

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