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Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is often special. These relationships can have both positive and negative consequences. The relationship can be especially challenging for many grandparents who have the full-time responsibility for raising their grandchildren. Almost four million children (6%) of children under the age of 18 in the United States live in grandparent-headed households. About 1.3 million of these children had no parent present in the grandparent-headed household which means that the grandparents are the primary source of care for these children. More and more children and grandparents are experiencing this trend. Between 1980 and 1990, there was a 44 percent increase in the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren. Every socioeconomic and ethnic group and every community contains grandparent-headed households. It is estimated that 40% of these households are in nonmetropolitan areas with populations under 100,000. About half of these grandchildren live in households that have incomes under \$20,000. It has been estimated that from 30-50% of children in some low income, inner-city neighborhoods are cared for by grandparents or other relatives. Approximately one-half of these grandchildren are younger than six years old.

Grandparents take grandchildren into their homes for a number of reasons including death, illness, incarceration, substance abuse, parental joblessness, teenage pregnancy, divorce and child neglect. Multivariate analysis of a longitudinal data set from the National Survey of Families and Households showed that females and those that had experienced the death of a child within the past five years were twice as likely to become a caregiving grandparent. Once the decision is made to take a grandchild into the home, the grandparents are confronted with problems that exceed the normal challenges of child rearing.

Neighbors, friends and human service and educational professionals may consider the grandparents unfit to raise a child because their own children became drug users or are incarcerated. The automatic attribution of children's deviancy to poor parenting reflect attitudes and stereotypes that can harm these households preventing the support from the legal, educational and human service systems that these grandparents need. These concerns should not overshadow the realization that family support and older adult relationships serve as two key assets to the healthy development of a child in these formative years.

Economic security is a key issue and it has been recommended that benefits accrue to the child and not the grandparent and that eligibility not be determined on the basis of household income. This means that a child would automatically be eligible for food stamps, health care coverage and other benefits ensuring that the grandparent's economic status would not be diminished as a result of taking on this responsibility. The lack of affordable day care can also impact the grandparents' ability to use OAA entitlements. There are programs that are age based such as meals-on-wheels that exclude children and cannot help to meet their nutritional needs. Once again, these concerns should be balanced by the fact that grandparents do also provide a

substantial economic value across the country for grandchildren and great-grandchildren with in-kind assistance and financial help.

The welfare reforms of 1996 changed a number of programs that helped families care for children. The state-run Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) must observe federal guidelines that may affect grandparents by limiting cash benefits to five years and requiring beneficiaries to secure jobs within two years. Grandparents can have a child-only grant and avoid these limitations but there are disadvantages such as lower grants and delayed payments. Grandparents must be persistent in learning about their rights and benefits which can be confusing and vary from one state to another.

Grandparents may need some kind of legally recognized status such as custody, guardianship and/or adoption showing the child's primary caregiver for school enrollment and/or medical consent. Some states do not recognize grandparents as foster parents thereby relegating these caregivers to welfare status and lower benefits if they are to receive any support at all from government sources.

A White House Mini-Conference in March 1995 supported a resolution addressing some of these issues calling for granting legal surrogated decision-making authority to grandparent caregivers in the absence of other responsibility persons without having to go to court and removing barriers to access to food stamps and other safety net programs. The resolution recognizes the emotional and financial stress on grandparents who are raising children at the same time that they are struggling financially and dealing with their own physical frailties. Comprehensive programs will need to make available respite and day care, legal assistance, mental health and advocacy services, health care and substance abuse treatment as well as programs for high risk children.

Affordable and appropriate housing is a major concern for many of these grandparents. A unique housing facility, GrandFamilies House, located near Boston, created from the shell of an abandoned nursing home, is the first facility of its kind in the nation available to low-income grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

Some recent research would even suggest that the additional stress of raising these grandchildren can lead to increased health problems of their own. Clinician's have observed increases in depression, anxiety and insomnia as well as exacerbations in hypertension, back and stomach problems and other conditions that may be caused by the physical and emotional demands of caregiving by grandparents. These caregivers also report increases in social isolation related to their new responsibilities.

The role of American grandparents has evolved with the changes in our social structures and values. Driven by these forces we see this element of grandparenting on the rise, and also are sensitive to the fact that grandparents place a priority on relationships with grandchildren. With this in mind very appropriately a number of resources have sprung up to assist them with

challenges they confront and support the positive contribution that are making for children and our society. One such example is The AARP Grandparent Information Center established in September 1993 in Washington DC to provide grandparents raising their grandchildren with a place to call or write when seeking assistance. The Center serves as an information and referral clearinghouse for information, publications and referral to national and local resources such as support groups. The Center also develops publications on legal, social health and financial issues affecting grandparent caregivers. The Center provides a public awareness educational campaign on problems of grandparent caregivers as well as technical assistance to community based grandparent and social service groups addressing these issues.

Resources

AARP Grandparent Information Center
601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20049
202-434-2296

<http://www.aarp.org/getans/consumer/grandparents.html>

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