

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Circumstances, Impact, and Actions for Success

Typically, grandparents are involved in the lives of their grandchildren in ways other than the daily primary caregiving. Afternoons playing in the park, watching and supporting activities like soccer games or piano recitals, occasional visits, phone calls, and babysitting are common ways grandparents connect and interact with their grandchildren. However, there is a growing trend in the United States of grandparents becoming the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. The U.S. Census of 2000 revealed that over 2.4 million grandparents held custodial responsibility of their grandchildren. That number increased 7% to 2.7 million in the latest census data and is likely to increase as this trend continues.¹ In Montana, there are more than 13,000 children living with and being cared for by their grandparents.²

Grandparents recognize several benefits associated with raising their grandchildren such as the chance to be an important part of their grandchildren's lives, the ability to watch them grow, and the opportunity to continue family traditions.^{3,4} However, in addition to the positive effects of grandparents becoming the primary caregivers for their grandchildren, there are also many challenges. Research suggests that grandparents raising grandchildren are more likely to experience emotional problems^{5,6} and physical health problems.^{7,8} Many grandparents are retired and live on a fixed income, thus financial problems are often cited as a challenge for grandparents raising grandchildren.³ These grandparents often have to engage with complicated systems like the court system, child welfare system, and law enforcement, which can be difficult to navigate.⁴ Social challenges including inadequate support and feelings of isolation are also identified by grandparents.^{4,9} Primary caregiving responsibilities can significantly limit the freedoms of which grandparents may have previously been accustomed, and they may sacrifice their own personal interests for those of their grandchildren.⁴ Additionally, the grandchildren that grandparents care for are at a greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems because of their exposure to adverse experiences.^{4,10}

This research summary provides information about grandparents raising grandchildren. Specifically, this summary explores who the grandparents raising their grandchildren are, and the circumstances surrounding grandparents who become primary caregivers to their grandchildren. This summary also explores research on the emotional, physical, financial, social, and legal impacts associated with these caregiving responsibilities. Finally, opportunities to lessen the negative impacts associated with grandparents assuming the primary caregiving responsibilities of their grandchildren are also discussed.

Grandparent Caregivers to Grandchildren

Grandparents have an important role in the lives of their grandchildren. Traditionally, grandparents have played an assistant role to parents raising their children; however, it is becoming increasingly common for grandparents to become primary caregivers for their grandchildren.^{1,3}

There are many different reasons why grandparents are raising their grandchildren. While every situation is unique, divorce, death of parents, incarceration, military deployments, parents' work or school-related responsibilities, abuse, abandonment, substance misuse, and mental health problems are common reasons grandparents become the primary caregivers to their grandchildren. Some research suggests that those who need out-of-home placement or kinship care are overrepresented by single mothers and low-income families who "arrived at their status due to substance abuse, teen pregnancy, AIDS, and incarceration in the middle generation."¹¹

The arrangement of grandparents assuming primary responsibility for their grandchildren may arise informally, that is, without a formal agreement or court ruling. Grandparents may see the parents struggling to care for their grandchildren and offer to take responsibility. In other situations, Child Protective Services and court rulings formally facilitate the process. Child Protective Services and court rulings may find a child's birthparent is unable to care for them and decide that an out-of-home placement with another family member or foster family is required. When a child is placed with a family member, this is called "kinship" care.¹²

Grandparents are often identified as a preferable placement for children in the child welfare system opposed to being put into the foster care system. The Federal Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First Act), enacted in February 2019, includes a focus on family foster care and providing resources to parents including kinship caregivers of children.¹³ Research suggests that children in their grandparents' care function better than children placed in foster care.¹⁴

Children living full time with their grandparents often feel positively about their grandparents being their primary caregivers.¹⁵ In a qualitative analysis focused on understanding the experience of grandchildren living with their grandparents, grandchildren identified feelings of safety and security, love, care, and belonging.¹⁵ Additionally, many children living with their grandparents want to maintain contact with their parents and other family members and cite this as an advantage of living with grandparents.¹⁵

Most grandparents providing custodial care to their grandchildren are under the age of 65 (72%), female (77%), and married (54%).⁶ The trends in demographics of grandparents raising grandchildren tend to be heterogeneous when it comes to race with 51% Caucasian, 38% African American, and 13% Hispanic.⁶ The caregiving arrangements generally last longer than 6 months suggesting that raising grandchildren isn't a temporary situation for most grandparents,¹⁶ and these arrangements often arise suddenly in response to an urgent need or adverse event.⁹

Impacts Associated With Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and Opportunities to Lessen the Negative Impacts

Research suggests there are emotional, physical, social, financial, and legal impacts associated with grandparents raising their grandchildren. In this section, these impacts are explored for grandparents and, when applicable, grandchildren as well. Opportunities to lessen the negative impacts associated with grandparents assuming the primary caregiving responsibilities of their grandchildren are also discussed.

Emotional Impact

Grandparents often feel a wide range of emotions when they become the primary caregivers to their grandchildren. The happy, proud, and rewarding feelings of being with family and a new constant companion are easy to acknowledge. Grandparents may experience feelings of pride, love, joy, and relief for taking in their grandchildren from a less than ideal situation.¹ However, grandparents may also experience feelings of fear, guilt, and resentment. These feelings are normal. In one study using the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised Inventory, a common tool for assessing mental health, 44% of grandparents scored in the 90th percentile, which is considered high enough to need mental health intervention.¹⁷

The circumstances leading to the need for grandparents to raise their grandchildren may evoke feelings of guilt, shame, resentment, anger, and upset as they process feelings about their own child not being able to care for their grandchildren because of incarceration, substance misuse, or an untreated mental health disorder. Guilt and shame are common emotions in these situations.⁶

“Grandparents may question their own inadequacy: What have they done wrong to have children who cannot care for their own children, and are they competent enough to deal with raising children again?”¹⁸ In a qualitative study to understand the experience of grandparents raising their grandchildren, Shampson and Hertlein found that managing feelings of disappointment with their own child’s choices and feelings that they had failed while raising their child were common.⁴

Further, in assuming their new primary caregiving role, it is common for grandparents to experience resentment feeling as though they are forced into a situation to have to become parents again.⁴ Children require a substantial commitment of time and energy and as a result, grandparents have less freedom resulting from the need to reorganize their lifestyle, shift priorities, and adjust to a new normal. Higher levels of stress are more likely among grandparent caregivers.⁵

For children, adjusting to having their grandparents as their primary caregivers can be trying and often a very difficult and highly stressful time as well. The circumstances surrounding an out-of-home placement can be a traumatic experience for children. Children who are placed into the custodial care of grandparents are at a greater risk for emotional and behavioral problems.¹⁷ Prior to living with grandparents, many children experience great adversity.¹⁵

Adverse childhood experiences can impact a person’s health and wellbeing throughout their lifespan, including problems with substance misuse. A child who has been exposed to adverse childhood experiences can be negatively impacted both socially and health-wise. These stresses normally stem from the trauma that put them into the care of their grandparent(s) in the first place. Even if the trauma is of no fault of the grandparent, “because of their negative experiences with their parents, children being raised in grandparent-headed families often display developmental, physical, behavioral, academic, and emotional problems.”¹⁹ Common examples of this are depression, anxiety, hyperactivity or inattention, health problems, learning disabilities, poor school performance, aggression, feelings of loss, anger, rejection, guilt, and attachment disorders.¹⁹

Other studies report that children raised by low-income grandparents fare worse in school engagement than children in low-income parent care due to feeling distracted because of their life adjustment and desire to be with their parent(s).²⁰ Experiences of loss, rejection, and abandonment are common among children requiring an out-of-home placement.

To support grandparents and their grandchildren, it is important to encourage the utilization of resources, especially as both grandparents and grandchildren adjust to their new roles. Social support, mental health practitioners, and community groups have all been proven to help grandparents and grandchildren adjust to their new roles.²¹

Resources like counseling and support groups can provide an outlet for grandparents to process their new role, seek guidance about challenges they are experiencing, process their feelings as a result of the big changes in their lives, and receive education that can help them support their grandchildren. For example, mental health practitioners can provide education to grandparents about what it means to be trauma informed.

Being trauma informed means having a lens with a broader explanation for why children might act a certain way, particularly when they have been exposed to traumatic or stressful events.²² Experiencing traumatic events like divorce, fighting in the household, or separation from a parent, has an impact on the developing brain that results in an overdeveloped limbic or reactionary system and an underdeveloped frontal cortex or thinking system. Being trauma informed does not mean excusing misbehaviors; it means understanding that the misbehavior of the child needs empathy and connection first before the behavior can be addressed or corrected. Being trauma informed also helps caregivers avoid taking misbehaviors personally or as personal attacks but rather as reactions within a really limited menu of options from which a traumatized brain has to choose. This understanding can help grandparents manage the behaviors of their grandchildren in ways that strengthen the relationship with the child rather than damage it.²³

Mental health practitioners and support groups can also provide guidance and tips to create a safe, structured, and consistent environment for their grandchildren. Creating a safe, structured, and consistent environment is protective for children's mental, emotional, and behavioral development.²⁴ Grandparents can create a safe, structured, consistent environment for their grandchildren through their daily practices. Bedtimes, mealtimes, and playtimes are good opportunities for providing that structure. Providing consistency with routines and rituals offers support for a child to thrive. Daily routines and structure can also help grandparents settle into a new schedule and foster a sense of calm during an emotionally turbulent time.

Accessing resources like counseling and support groups can help grandchildren as well. Mental health practitioners and support groups can be a safe place for children to talk about their feelings about living with grandparents while navigating new rules and new environments. These resources can also be helpful to support children in talking about their feelings toward their parents and the experiences they had prior to living with their grandparents.

Physical Health Impact

The implications of mental health on physical health are well documented in many different contexts. By virtue of being of older age, grandparents inherently have lower health markers than other age groups, and with the added stress and physical demands of being the primary caregiver to a child, there are additional health concerns for grandparents. In one study, grandparents caring for their grandchildren reported significantly lower satisfaction with their health and poorer health status than grandparents not caring for their grandchildren.⁷ In contrast, some grandparents report a "rejuvenation" by the constant companionship of much younger people, but these reports are more anecdotal and are based on how people feel instead of definable health markers.¹² The activity level of grandparents normally increases with the addition of a child to the household, but if the added stress is not managed well then health can deteriorate. Most grandchildren are extremely grateful for their grandparents raising them; however, age and health limitations are normally listed as being challenges to the relationship.²⁵

While physical health is often a challenge of grandparents, the grandchildren they are raising may also experience health problems. Research suggests that there are physical health impacts both in the short term and long term for children who have adverse childhood experiences. Examples of short-term impacts include poor health and physical illness, reduced social skills, depression, anxiety, higher levels of stress, inability to concentrate or focus, and being easily distracted. Long term impacts of adverse childhood experiences go well into adulthood and include health outcomes like higher rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and strokes.

Medical and mental health professionals can help ease the short-term and long-term health impacts. Encouraging grandparents to access resources for themselves and their grandchildren can bolster health outcomes.

Social Impact

Grandparents may experience social isolation as a result of raising grandchildren.³

Grandparents may feel like they must deal with their current challenges alone. They may be reluctant to reach out for support for fear their peers wouldn't be able to relate to their current situation. Instead of attending a social event with their friends, grandparents raising their grandchildren may find themselves choosing different social events to accommodate their grandchildren.⁴ In a qualitative research study, it was identified that attending activities and social events for their grandchildren can feel isolating and leave grandparents feeling "out of touch."⁴ One grandfather stated, "I look around and I am the oldest guy there. I wonder what the hell am I doing here? Then I remind myself it is okay, I have done this before."⁴ Another study revealed that grandparents experience "dissonance, or role-identity conflict" between their traditional grandparent role and their new grandparent as parent role.³

Research also suggests that there are social impacts for children being raised by grandparents.¹⁵ One study reveals that approximately half of the grandchildren in the study “expressed shame and secrecy about their situation, but this was generally related to the reasons why their real parents were unable to care for them rather than specifically because they were living with grandparents.”¹⁵ Other social impacts revealed in this study included children identifying with moving to a new house and/or school and the resulting loss of friends, feelings of humiliation as a result of discussing their parent’s problems with others, “several children perceived that others treated them differently or judged them because of their unusual living arrangements, and a number of the younger children referred to being teased by their peers.”¹⁵

Finding support systems for both the grandchild and grandparent(s) is important for managing the physical health, mental health, finances, and stress of raising children. Strong social support is correlated with numerous positive outcomes including buffering the negative impacts of stress and trauma, overall health and wellbeing, resilience, and psychological health.²⁶ Family members, support groups, counsellors, and medical and mental health professionals can provide support that can help relieve the burdens associated with parenting. Studies suggest that finding adequate “social support may lay the groundwork for better health over time among grandparent caregivers, and that worse health in concert with less social support may predispose such persons to more depression over time.”²⁷

Financial and Legal Impact

Many grandparents live on a fixed or limited income, making the financial responsibilities of caregiving difficult. They have additional expenses related to caring for their grandchildren without additional income. 19% of grandparent caregivers live below the poverty line, which is \$21,720 a year for a two-person household according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.⁶ Further, grandparent caregivers generally receive fewer benefits than foster parents in the foster care system, which puts a larger economic burden on grandparents.²⁸

Many grandparents find themselves needing legal advice when it comes to deciding what is best concerning their grandchildren. However, legal assistance can be expensive and add to the financial stress grandparents may have as a result of raising their grandchildren. Hiring attorneys, paying legal fees, and time spent preparing for court proceedings to formally take custody of grandchildren can be an unanticipated costly burden.

Legal assistance is often identified as a major need of kinship care. “Informal” caregiving is a common practice that can lead to problems regarding “accessing medical care and enrolling children in school and creates uncertainty for both grandparents and grandchildren.”¹⁷ Adoption, custody, and defining the custodial responsibility of the grandparent(s) legally is important for obtaining benefits from government organizations. 33% of children in grandparent-headed homes do not have insurance, which is primarily because of a lack of formal legal basis for obtaining insurance on a dependent.¹⁷ Further, without legal custody or guardianship, there are situations where an unfit birthparent can take back custody of a child causing uncertainty for grandparents and for children.

Community groups, religious groups, and government and non-governmental organizations exist nationwide to provide support specifically to grandparents or kinship raising children. They provide social gatherings, events, financial support, legal expertise, and advice on best practices for raising grandchildren.⁶ These services can help alleviate the stress of raising a child in this modern era.

Conclusions

Grandparents raising their grandchildren is an increasing phenomenon, thus it is important to understand the nature of grandparent caregivers, what the circumstances in which grandparents become primary caregivers to their grandchildren are, and the impacts associated with these caregiving responsibilities. The experience of grandparents raising their grandchildren can be rewarding and challenging simultaneously, and there are implications for both grandparents and grandchildren. In understanding the unique challenges, opportunities to lessen the negative impacts can be identified, implemented, and expanded to help both grandparents and their grandchildren thrive.

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