

Some Concluding Thoughts: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

As long as there continues to be so many teenagers (1/3 unwed) having babies, and as long as so many teenagers abuse alcohol and drugs, Grandparents will be called on to raise their grandchildren. Grandparents generally do not plan to raise their grandchildren, but appear to be the most logical and willing people to parent these children. Young parents (usually unmarried) are financially unable to set up a new household, and so, the young mother resides with her parents, or leaves her child(ren) with her parents to raise.

Our studies show that the grandparents can expect to parent their grandchild(ren) a little over five years with 60% of the grandparents anticipating that they will be raising these children permanently. About 4/5 of these families have made formal legal arrangements regarding the care of the child while 1/5 have only informal caretaking arrangements. About 7-8 percent of these grandparents adopt their grandchildren.

As stated in earlier articles, 3.4 million grandchildren under 18 live in grandparent-headed households in the U.S., 1 million of these without a parent present. The total number of people (grandparents, parents, children) in these households exceeds 10 million people and this constitutes a major family unit population, which until this time, we have known little about.

Older, poorer, less educated grandparents might not be expected to do as well raising these young children, but our

studies indicate that they do as well as parents with regard to issues of health and school behavior. The grandparents with smaller incomes report more financial stressors while those with higher incomes indicate their pressures are more about time, and not knowing when this volunteer assignment might come to an end. Both high and low income grandparents indicate that one of the major stressors they face in dealing with their own children (the parents) regarding the day-to-day raising of these children.

Whether we talked to grandparents, parents and grandchildren who were rich to poor, African-American, or Caucasian, well-educated or poorly educated, similar themes emerged. There appeared to be consistent themes present in each group in terms of feelings, dreams, and conclusions with regard to participation in the Grandparent-Parent-Grandchild triad.

Feelings

When grandparents raise a grandchild, the grandparents are seen by the community at large as heroes/heroines, the parents are seen as irresponsible and the grandchildren are seen as the victims. The interactions among the people in this triad result in many feelings and is best summarized in the following table:

Feelings Toward			
	GP	P	GC
Grandparent	Proud	Anger (Resentment)	Love
Parent	Grateful/ Resentful	Anger (Guilt) Sad	Estrangement
Grandchildren	Grateful	Anger (Resentment)	Confident/ Normal

The positive feelings are exchanged by the grandparent and grandchild, while the negative feelings are generally reserved for the parent. Note that while the grandparent feels proud of their own efforts and the grandchild feels confident and normal, the parent feels anger toward themselves (guilt) and sadness because of the "loss" of their child.

The dreams and conclusions of the grandparent, parent, and grandchild are summarized in the following Table. Note that the grandparents' dream is that the parent(s) would raise the child, but they would do the same thing over again given similar circumstances. (Only three sets of grandparents indicated that they wouldn't do it again out of the more than 200 families we contacted.) The parents dream was to have raised their own child(ren) and all stated they wish they could have the opportunity to do it over differently than they did. Surprisingly, grandchildren (even those who were abused) all stated that their dream was to live with their (fully functioning) mothers, but expressed over and over their

undying gratefulness to their grandparents for raising them during such a formative period.

	Dream	Conclusion
Grandparent	Parent raise child	Would do it again
Parent	Raise own child	Would do it differently
Grandchild	Live with mother	Grateful to Grandparent

- When asked for advice to other grandparents now facing this very complicated situation, grandparents said to tell everyone now involved to remember these four very simple admonitions:
- Realize the commitment you've made before you accept it.
- It is a difficult, sometimes unending, job.
- Love your grandchildren.
- Love your own children.

In the cases we studied, the most successful families remembered the last two admonitions and never stopped working toward the day that the parents, if living and able, might parent the child they had brought to this life.