

Invisible Care Givers:

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

A seven-year-old child described a grandparent as "someone who has no kids of their own, so they have time to love other peoples' little kids." A grandparent stated that grandparents and grandchildren get along so well because they have a "common enemy." Why grandparents and grandchildren typically get along so well perhaps remains an issue for debate. One thing that perhaps cannot be debated is the special loving relationship that exists between most grandparents and their grandchildren.

Many authors have tried to describe this special relationship, but to us the most helpful explanation comes from understanding various life stages people experience as described by psychiatrist Erik Erikson. According to Erikson, younger parents focus on their own identities, relationships, and work issues while older grandparents are more concerned about the successes of the next few generations. When grandparents' own children falter in raising their children (the grandchildren), the grandparents often represent the most logical and available resource to help raise these young children to grow and develop until the parents are ready to assume or reassume their parenting role.

The number of grandparents who raise their children in the United States is staggering. In 1993 nearly 3.4 million children in the U.S. under age 18 lived in grandparent-headed households. Over 1 million of these children were in

grandparent-headed households without their parent(s) present. The number directly involved in these homes totals more than 10 million people (grandparents, parent(s), grandchildren), and this figure does not include the parent(s) (1/5 of the time the mother and over 9/10 of the time the father) and grandparents (almost always the paternal grandparents) living outside of these homes.

During the past few years we have been looking into the issue of grandparents raising their grandchildren in an attempt to gather more information as to why this family phenomenon is occurring and what it is doing to those involved. We have spoken to hundreds of grandparents who have raised, or are raising their grandchildren, interviewed fifty Midwestern, middle-class grandparents for two to three hours each, and have also interviewed parents and grandchildren. We surveyed one hundred and fifty grandparents from 46 different states.

We reviewed 25 years of U.S. Census data and wrote a special computer program to access previously untapped data from the National Health Survey. After reviewing our data, we would like to share our findings about this important topic in this series of five articles. One half of our interviews were with African-American grandparents. Our surveyed participants also covered the full range of incomes and many other racial/ethnic groups. It is interesting to note that regardless of racial, regional, or income considerations, these grandparents, parents, and grandchildren were more alike regarding their ideas and feelings about this family

arrangement than were they different. We will not both the similarities and differences in these articles.

Background

In 1993 3.4 million children under the age of eighteen were living in households headed by grandparents. This figure was up 55% since 1970, and reveals some startling trends. The biggest change in these figures has occurred because more young parents are attempting to raise their children in these grandparent-headed homes. In 1970, there were 1.2 million grandchildren living in grandparent-headed homes with their parents present and nearly 1 million grandchildren living with their grandparents without their parents present. By 1993 there were 2.4 million grandchildren living with their grandparents with their parents present and another 1 million grandchildren living with their grandparents without their parents present.

The 100% increase from 1.2 million to almost 2.4 million children living with their grandparents and parents represents a dramatic change in the manner in which some children are being raised in this country. These increases are particularly remarkable in that between 1970 and 1993 the number of households with children under 18 increased only 10.9% (from 60 million to 66.5 million households) and the number of children under 18 actually declined 4% (from 69.1 million to 66.9 million). The number of grandchildren living exclusively with grandparents has remained relatively constant during this period (around 1 million children), but

this living arrangement still constitutes a major parenting problem to these non-traditional caregivers.

Table 1 (in millions)
U.S. Households/Children 1970-1993

	1970	1993	% Change
All Households	63.4	96.4	+52
Households (w/children <18)	60.0	66.5	+11
All children <18	69.1	66.9	-3
Children <18 living in grandparent-headed household	2.2	3.4	+55
Children <18 living in grandparent-headed household (parent(s) not present)	.96	1.0	+4
Children <18 living in grandparent-headed household (parent(s) present)	1.2	2.4	100%

Of all children 18 years and younger in the U.S., 5.1% live in households headed by a grandparent (3.6% with parents present and 1.5% with parents not present). These figures are even higher in African-American families with slightly more than 15% of these families headed by a grandparent and 3.5% headed exclusively by a grandparent. In 1995, 68% of all grandparents raising their grandchildren (without parents present) were Caucasian, 29% were African American, 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian. Ten percent were Hispanic (NOTE: Hispanic may be of any race).

The Reasons Grandparents Assume Responsibility for Grandchildren

Grandchildren generally do not come to live with their grandparents because something wonderful has happened in the family. Usually, some big problem is facing the family. Our studies show that the most common reasons grandchildren join their grandparents are substance abuse (far and away the primary reason), parental neglect, parents unable to care for their children (usually immaturity), parents unwilling to care for their children (usually substance-abuse related), physical abuse by parent(s) and sexual abuse of the children (often by the boyfriends of the mothers).

Other reasons such as (parent(s) in jail, or a parent's death) comprise a very small percentage of these cases. Even when what occurs is a positive event (both teenage parents receiving a scholarship from a distant university), problems may develop for every member in the Grandparent-Parent-Grandchild triad. The new living arrangements cause new roles for all (even the friends of the grandparents have new roles sometimes creating unexpected problems) and the period of adjustment can be short or unending. Even when the adjustment period is small, and family members (and others close to the family) adjust rapidly, there are many positive and negative feelings to deal with if the family is to thrive.

It is unusual for grandparents to be the primary caretakers of the grandchild from the first day of life because the parents, unless disabled in some fashion, usually intend to care for

the child and plan to be loving parents, who will be available to love and raise their child. For whatever reasons, some parents are unable to carry out their intentions and the grandparents (nearly always the maternal grandparents) assume responsibility for raising the grandchild.

Although the switch to the grandparents as caregivers is made to resolve an existing problem, a new set of problems develop. The community at large sees the grandparents as heroines/heroes for assuming this new responsibility, although some question their sanity/intelligence for taking in the awesome responsibility. This community also sees the parent as irresponsible and the grandchild as a victim. If we look more closely at this family triad, we see that each family member has a distinct set of feelings, different from those of other members in the triad. The feelings expressed by each member of the triad will be discussed in more detail in subsequent articles.

Grandparent Profile

The median age of a grandparent raising a grand child is 57 (with 23% over 65 and 7% over 75); the household income is \$18,000 (as compared to the parent-headed household of \$36,000); the educational level is low (58% have not graduated from high school and only 16% have an education beyond high school) and most grandparents raising grandchildren (57%) are from the South (with the Northeast, Midwest, and West regions having 14% each).

What are the chances that a poorer, less educated, older person will do a good job of raising a young grandchild who was placed in this situation under adverse conditions, while at the same time maintaining their own mental and physical health? At first blush, we would guess that the chances are very poor for a successful outcome for either the grandchild or the grandparent, but as you will see in the coming articles, everyone (except the parents of these children) seems to hold their own or get better.