

# **The Grandchildren:**

## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Nearly 3.4 million children live in households headed by a grandparent, 1 million of these children in homes with no parent present. Of the children being raised by their grandparents approximately one-quarter are under two years of age, one-quarter are two to four years old, and one-half five to seventeen years old.

One would guess that living with grandparents who have less income (one-half of parent headed homes), less education (nearly 60% haven't graduated from high school), and being much older (median age - 57) than the average parent, that the children might have more problems. We know that in the general population, children from poorer and less educated families have more health and school problems, but that does not seem to be the case with the million children being raised by grandparents.

By extracting data from the 50 thousand family National Health Survey we have determined that the children being raised by grandparents seem to be better in almost every health category measured (see Table 1) than are children in parent-headed families (both parents present), and much better than some other family configurations (e.g., single parents or step-parent present).

**Table 1**  
**Children's Health Problems**

<b>Children Experiencing:</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Children Raised By GP's</b>
Accidents or injuries	13.4%	10.3%
Headaches	2.5%	1.5%
Bed-wetting	2.3%	0.8%
Sick-bed days	11.1%	6.2%
Speech Problems	2.3%	2.2%
Restricted activity (health)	17.1%	9.2%
Missed school days	13.0%	7.4%
Asthma problems	3.9%	4.5%

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With regard to school behaviors (5-17 years old), the grandparent-raised children do better than parent-raised children with regard to antisocial behaviors and anxiety/depression, the same with headstrong behaviors and hyperactivity issues, and less well regarding peer conflict/social withdrawal and dependency issues. The grandparents are doing something right as they raise these children. We would predict that they would do worse, but they are generally doing as well or better.

We turned to adults (21-44) who were raised exclusively by their grandparents for more information. We conducted

intense interviews with ten adult grandchildren and held informal discussions with another forty.

### **"Don't Know How We Got There"**

Most grandchildren don't seem to know the real reasons they were placed in their grandparents homes. No one mentioned alcohol or drugs and only one mentioned physical/sexual abuse. The most recurring theme was similar to the one related to us by one of the woman:

*It's a long story. We had several episodes when we lived with my grandparents. When you're really young, you don't know what's going on. It wasn't a good marriage. My mom had a lot of problems and my dad wasn't around much, so we just kind of ended up with my grandparents.*

### **"I Hardly Knew my Father"**

The grandchildren referred, rather nonchalantly, to the fact that their father was not around most of the time. One grandchild expressed the feelings of most of those interviewed by saying:

*I hardly knew him. He reappeared in my life once-in-a-while. One thing my mother used to say to me when she was angry was, 'You're just like your father.' My father was not much of an influence in my life. He was never around.*

In most instances, fathers weren't mentioned because they were gone before their child was born or shortly thereafter. A few of the interviews, however, talked about their feelings of bitterness and anger at their rejection by their fathers, but most of them felt, as one grandchild put it, "Fathers aren't suppose to raise children. mothers are!"

### **"I Wish My Mom Hadn't Let Me Down"**

The grandchildren in this study reserved most of the anger, blame, and bitterness for their mothers who were, "the one person I wanted to trust most who let me down." One granddaughter described the situation in these words:

*My house was grandma's and grandpa's. I called them "mom" and "dad" and called my mother Barb. She insisted I call her "mom", so when I got angry, I called her "Momma Barb." When I won any honors my mother was always there but when I didn't accomplish anything I thought, "You're never here to comfort me." I have a deep seated resentment. She let me down my whole life.*

Given there was a great deal of resentment, still there was ambivalence about how these grandchildren felt about their mothers. Even though the anger and resentment were still there, so too was there a sense of loyalty to their mothers expressed by almost every grandchild. No matter how great their admiration and love was for their grandparents, every grandchild wished that their mother had been able to raise them.

## **"My Grandparents Were There For Me"**

Our interviews related anecdotes about their grandparents with a great deal of love and affection. A few indicated that they felt guilt for what their grandparents had to give up to raise them. The grandparents provided a safe haven for their grandchildren. One grandson said:

*They are generous people. I really didn't have what I consider parents. My grandparents are the closest thing to that. They gave me a chance for a normal life like other kids and more of a fixed ground. I know my mom loves me but it's just not stable. Living with my grandparents was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. They loved me and let me know they loved me.*

The grandchildren indicated that their grandparents provided them with stability and consistency. Living in the same place for an extended period of time enabled them to feel at home in the community and to establish friendships with other children. Amid the instabilities brought on by the parents, the grandparents were able to reinforce faithful, loving, lasting, trustworthy relationships and helped heal the scars.

## **Four Themes**

Four themes emerged when grandchildren began to talk about themselves: a sense, as a child, that something must have been wrong with them because they were abandoned by their parents, especially their mother; early feelings of

isolation and loss of control over their lives; a reluctance to allow anyone to get close to them; and, strong feelings of toughness and independence.

All of the adult grandchildren talked about their early feelings of loss, loneliness and isolation as well as their difficulties with trust and attachment. One of the women related her experience and the emotional scare it caused, most are still with her:

*My husband says he pays for a lot of the scars I carry and I think he is right. I have a lot of feelings that well up from my experience. The person I trusted the most let me down. It's not so much I'm guarded, I'm just not an easy person to know, but I need a lot of friends. I require a lot of people around me; but if they hurt me I just can cut them off without a blink. I can cut them off as easily as I cut my nails. There's isolation built in me that won't allow me to be hurt.*

Out of this sense of abandonment and lack of control over their earlier lives, the interviewees all developed a fierce independence and inner strength. One of the woman interviewed discussed this change:

*I'm a strong person. I've had to be. The thing I do best is take care of myself and my son. I learned not to depend on anyone else. I don't like to have to rely on someone else unless I really need to. I'd ask for help but I don't like to. I'd rather do it on my own.*

In retrospect, these adult grandchildren wished that their lives could have been different but they realize that circumstances dictated how they were raised. They are especially grateful and loving to their grandparents who "rescued" them and provided "a stability, a model for when I had a family of my own."