

The Grandparents:

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Grandparents raising grandchildren come from all races, ethnic groups, socio-economic levels and all educational levels. While it is true that grandparents raising grandchildren have less money and education than the national average, we have interviewed attorneys, salespeople, school teachers, computer programmers, accountants, engineers, doctors, nurses, retirees, homemakers, and people working in many other occupations and professions. Their careers, socio-economic status and educational levels may have varied, but their stories were very similar.

Most had assumed the care giving responsibilities for their grandchildren because one or both of the parents were chemically dependent and could not care for their children. The majority of grandchildren who were being cared for were their daughter's children. The fathers of these children either disappeared shortly after the children's birth or gradually became less and less involved in their children's lives. The grandparents stepped in to parent their grandchildren because as one grandfather said, "The children are super smart and sensitive. They can be super citizens or super criminals. The choice is partially ours."

All of the grandparents agonized over the guilt and pain regarding their own child's unrealized potential. One grandmother described her daughter's substance abuse and problems that it created for her two grandchildren. The

grandparents had temporary custody of the children and were bringing them home from a Little League game when the children saw the bodies of both their mother and father on the front lawn. The father had shot the mother and then killed himself. Both were substance abusers. The grandmother remembered that someone had observed that she did not even cry and said, "I have no tears left for my daughter. My tears are for her children." The grandfathers exhibited a lot of anger toward their daughters, but the grandmothers expressed more feelings of guilt and self-blame.

The grandparents, as well as the grandchildren, wished that the children's parents could raise them. One grandmother spoke of the fantasies of her two grandchildren. One was that their mother will come and take them home to live with her. "Grandchildren just don't understand," she said, "no child wants her mother more than the rejected child and that breaks my heart."

Being a Parent Again

Many of the problems and concerns mentioned by the grandparents in our study were the same as most parents experience...lack of time, lack of money, discipline problems with children, sibling rivalry, peer pressure and school problems. A grandfather of two teenage boys said, "You think they are going to hell in a hand basket. We have different values."

Grandparents raising grandchildren face many other problems that are unique to their situation. There is always some ambivalence about taking on this caretaking role as well as dealing with the pain of possibly losing the child. This ambivalence is expressed in the words of one of the grandparents, "I'm terribly attached to this child. What if my daughter takes her away? Yet I still get upset because I should not be the one to be doing this. It's like my daughter is the big sister and I'm really the mother."

The age disparity between the grandparents and the parents of their grandchildren's friends created problems for some of these grandparents. They talked about feeling like "the odd man out" at Little League games and the PTA and of having a difficult time keeping up physically with active youngsters. The grandparents of teenagers wonder how they can handle their teen's dating, driving the family car and general rebelliousness. One grandmother said, "Just when you feel like all this is behind you, then its time to start all over again." Most felt that they are better parents now because they learned from earlier mistakes with their own children and more patient now. Most felt some anxiety over the uncertainty of when, how, or if the situation would end.

Broken Promises

The grandparents' major concern for their grandchildren was whether the situation would have a lasting emotional impact on the grandchildren. A second major concern was regarding the child's relationship with the parents. Many spoke of the parents' broken promises to write or to visit and

the disappointment in the grandchild's eyes over lost expectations.

Grandparents described the pain that they and the grandchildren felt when parents stepped back into the children's lives and threatened their stability and security. "The children's greatest desire is to please their parents," said one grandmother, "If only I was better, my parents wouldn't leave me, and then the nightmares and the bedwetting starts when they are afraid they will have to leave here."

For the most part, these grandparents felt abandoned by a society that does not address the needs of "law abiding citizens who work hard and pay taxes." They felt that the laws are too lenient for parents who are unable to care for their own children who should not be exposed to things which make them grow up to be criminals and substance abusers. Many grandparents spoke of court battles to get the children and the expenses involved. Few received help from Social Services.

What If I Die?

Another issue for grandparents raising grandchildren is one of their own morality. A big question is, "What happens to these children if I die?" This is pressing issue for some of the grandparents. The median age of the grandparents raising grandchildren in the U.S. is 57 years, with about 50,000 being 70-79 and 5,000 being over 80.

Love is the Answer

Despite all of the frustration, anger, and problems with being the custodial parent for their grandchildren, all of the grandparents talked about the joy of watching the children grow and develop. They felt that they provided a real measure of security for their grandchildren. One grandfather said, "I know where they are. I know they're safe. I know they aren't hungry. I know they have a good home and they will be given the best education we can give them." A grandmother speaking of her granddaughter said, "Watching her grow and learn, watching her develop physically, mentally, and emotionally is wonderful.

With your own children you are so wrapped up with trying to be the perfect parent, the second time around you gain insights and joys you didn't as a parent." From a 90-year-old grandfather we received this response, "We raised five grandchildren. Couldn't get a nicer bunch." He talked about having a stroke and of receiving help from all of the grandchildren he helped raise.

He described how they were all happy, successful, productive adults. In one family, the grandmother passed away and the grandfather described the joy and comfort that he received from his grandson and granddaughter, "I don't feel 65, I have more kids coming in and out of here than ever before. You never know where you are going to find them. I'm very active in the Booster Club. I'm going out and looking for a job because I'll be losing them soon. I love them. Even now as grown adults they still say 'I love you' and kiss me."

There is no doubt that these grandparents found much joy and satisfaction in parenting their grandchildren and if faced with a similar situation again, and nearly everyone agreed that they would do it all over again.