

# The Parents:

## Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Approximately 4.5 million parents produced the 3.4 million children under 18 who now live in grandparent-headed households. Counting the 2.4 million grandparents who provide parenting skills in these homes, this totals 10.3 million people. Adding in the grandparents not directly involved in childcare, the grand total reaches over 12.5 million people, not counting other relatives who may also be involved. Unfortunately, only a little over 1.6 million of the 4.5 million parents of these children have elected to stay active in daily child rearing activities and paternal grandparents are rarely involved on a regular basis.

Parents who elect to stay involved encounter problems carrying out parenting roles while living in their parents' homes. These parents cite the constant struggle for the control of their own children. One young mother said, "When my daughter wanted to go play with her girlfriend, I'd say yes and mom would say no. My daughter would look at me like....who am I suppose to listen to?"

Finally, I told her that...as long as we're living with Gramma, you listen to her. That hurt me. I didn't have to say that, but I'm just so grateful that they took us in." And another mother said, "We had some rough times over who was calling the shots. I think my dad made a lot of decisions because I was immature, but that went on far too long. It's a bad situation if you give someone full control--it's hard to expect them to release it back. It was a terrible struggle for control!"

A little over 25% of the grandparents reported no conflict with the parents regarding raising the child(ren). Although 50% of the children are age five years or older, there were few comments about school work, discipline, feeding schedules or bed-time issues. Surprisingly, the biggest problem for grandparents seemed to be the behavior of the parents--parents coming and going--in and out of children's lives (50%) and lack of mother involvement with her child(ren) (38%).

Another issue raised by parents was the animosity they felt from their brothers and sisters for putting their parents (the grandparents) into this very difficult parenting situation much later in life. Since the parent of the grandchild tends to be the youngest child in the family this young parent is seen as continuing their "spoiled ways" and the grandparent is viewed as continuing to spoil "their baby" and their new grandchild as well.

This phenomenon needs further study in that it adds a troublesome situation to an already difficult family problem. One teen mother commented on this issue and what it had done to the family: "My older sister is isolated from the family right now. I think there is so much going on with her. She has had a lot of trouble dealing with the fact that I had a baby and I wasn't punished. She sees that as another thing I got away with. She thinks mom and dad love me more."

The problems for parents are almost greater when they don't live with their parents and their child. They become

estranged from their parents and disconnected from their child. Our studies show that the whereabouts of 1/5 of the mothers and 1/4 of the fathers are unknown to family. Fifteen percent of these mothers and 30% of the fathers are working. Only 29% of mothers and 22% of fathers live in the immediate area near their children.

The biggest problem faced by these parents is substance abuse (almost 60% for mothers and over 50% for fathers), and over 60% of mothers are listed as unable to care for their children (half of those unwilling), and 40% of the fathers unable and 33% unwilling to care for their child(ren). One father spoke about being a parent too early in his life: "You haven't begun to know yourself and now you have an extension of yourself to teach growing-up skills to...and you're not grown up yourself. Those first years are a blur. I don't know, maybe I blocked it out. A lot being young is you don't know enough to watch for that first step. I was too into my own self and my problems to notice anyone else...so now all I can remember about that is different pieces, mostly just scenes."

The parents are often viewed by the community at large as irresponsible for not fulfilling their parenting role. We found that the father is often viewed with contempt, but soon forgotten because he disappears too quickly. If the mother remains visible, she receives the most negativity. The mother has feelings of both gratefulness and resentment toward her parents (the grandparents). She is grateful to her parents for raising her child, but if close communication does not continue, the gratefulness soon turns to resentfulness,

because the grandparents have assumed the role she sees as hers.

Many grandparents tell stories of parents who return to the new family situation after a lengthy absence, with the expectation that they will immediately take control of their child. This situation can confuse the child(ren) and create communication problems between grandparents and the parent(s).

Some parents indicate that they were never given a proper chance to parent the child. They claim they had little to say in the decision that the grandparents would raise their baby. Some parents even go so far as to say that their child was "stolen from me".

In every case where this claim was made, further investigation revealed that the parent was the only family member holding this view. Nevertheless, when this view is held, the communication between grandparent and parent has deteriorated to a dangerously low level and efforts need to be made to re-establish lines of communication. Parents who relinquished their parenting role felt very sad about their decision (every parent interviewed cried when discussing their decision to have their parents raise their child), but usually indicated that they did so in the best interest of the child.

Parents who we interviewed who did not have regular involvement with their child(ren) began to feel estranged from their child, saw their child less and less, and started to

rationalize that it was in the best interest of the child for them to be absent. We noticed that in these situations, the estrangement widened and resentment deepened. The more the resentment builds towards the grandparents, the less likely it is that the parent will assume the parenting role, and the more likely it is that the grandparents will be providing long-term care for the grandchild(ren).

The best situations we observed were ones where the older generation gave unconditional love and support to their children and their children's children. Whether the parent was able to immediately parent their child or not was not the determining factor in whether they would eventually parent the child. In families where the love and support was high, the likelihood of the parent assuming the parenting role with their child was also much greater.

One young woman said, "My mom sat on the edge of my bed and said, 'We'll solve this.' My Aunt and Uncle really surprised me too. They live in a posh community and I felt they would turn their backs on me, but they were the most willing to accept the baby. My Mom and Dad and Aunt and Uncle didn't change at all..they just loved us and supported us. I made a bad choice to get pregnant, but we've all worked it out, and I still have my family and Ted (the baby) too."

In our studies, the parents (in the Grandparent-Parent-Grandchild Triad) were not unfeeling individuals who set out to abandon their children, but rather, were young, immature people (often altered by drugs and/or alcohol) who found

themselves overwhelmed by a situation they could not handle. They did what made the most sense to them (have their parents take care of their child) and in turn frequently suffered sadness (loss of the child), resentment (anger at others), and guilt (anger at self). These negative feelings are only abated or removed by the parent reestablishing healthy bonds with their parents and their child.