

Relatives Raising Children

Coping with Lifestyle Changes



Relatives step in as caregivers because they know their home is a more stable, loving environment for the child's well-being over the long term than placement in foster care.

The circumstances that make full time caregiving of children necessary usually are not ones grandparents or relatives would happily choose. Such situations arise when a child's parents become unable to continue in that role because of substance abuse, mental or physical illness, long-term unemployment, incarceration, military deployment, or death. Relatives step in as caregivers because they know their home is a more stable, loving environment for the child's well-being over the long term than placement in foster care.

Two major categories of grandparents or other relatives raising children full-time are:

- Multigenerational households, in which the relative, the child's parents and the child live together in one place

- "Skipped generation" families, in which the relative takes over full-time care of the child without the parents present in the home. As grandparents or other relatives begin the process of coping with these changed circumstances, it is helpful to recognize that there are many positive aspects about raising children.

- Children may help caretakers feel emotionally fulfilled.
- Children may add zest to life.
- Children may provide caretakers with a sense of purpose.
- Children may help define what is most important, and thus provide a lively perspective.
- Children may contribute to our sense of vitality.
- Children may keep us focused on the now.

Note: This publication describes some actions that you as a grandparent or relative who is parenting a child can take to manage the child and take care of yourself. We hope that the information will help you respond lovingly to your child during the changes and transitions that come with encore parenting.



It takes a lot of time and energy to raise a child. As the primary care provider, you worry about things such as the child's health, education, legal issues, financial needs, and emotional well-being.

Challenges in raising children

Even though we may feel glad—or at least willing—to care full time for one or more children in our extended family if the need occurs, every caregiver goes through an adjustment when a child unexpectedly comes to live with us. Research tells us that it is okay—even healthy—to talk about the problems and concerns of parenting. To cope well, caregivers need to recognize and accept negative and ambivalent feelings about assuming the care of a child. These feelings and emotions are normal. Examples include:

Anger and resentment. You may feel angry that the child's parents cannot provide for the child. You might resent having this parental responsibility thrust upon you. You might also experience some anger about disrupted plans you have for yourself.

Guilt and negative self-talk. You may blame yourself for your child's inability to take care of your grandchild. You may tell yourself that had you been a better parent, this situation would not have occurred.

Loneliness. Children take a lot of physical and emotional time. It is not uncommon for caregivers to feel consumed with concern and care for a child. You may feel as though others do not understand what you are

experiencing. You may have little in common with other parents whose children are the age of your child. You may find yourself socially isolated.

Stress. It takes a lot of time and energy to raise a child. As the primary care provider, you worry about things such as the child's health, education, legal issues, financial needs, and emotional well-being. This pressure can begin to feel overwhelming and can even contribute to depression or physical illnesses. For help in navigating emotional and legal issues in Kentucky, visit the Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Grandchildren Training Project: Support Group Manual at <http://www.uky.edu/TRC/sites/www.uky.edu/TRC/files/GPAORRC-Jan2013.pdf>.

Concerns about managing finances. According to a 2012 study published in the *Journal of Family Issues*, grandparents are more likely to step into a full-time parenting role if they are members of a cultural minority or have fewer economic resources. But even families with more financial resources may be hard-pressed at times to provide money to their adult children and grandchildren.

Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends who become primary caregivers need to balance "spoiling" a child with structure and discipline.



Unexpected role changes. When raising someone else's child, role changes must take place. Grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends who become primary caregivers need to balance "spoiling" a child with structure and discipline. The child may not know what to expect of you and your role in his life, either. He will need clear

routines, predictability, and reasonable, non-violent discipline as well as love and support. If the child is old enough, a frank discussion between you and him about expectations and feelings may be helpful. You can tell him that you will always love him and that he can depend on you, no matter what happens. For younger children, just setting up and sticking to consistent routines for meals, bedtime, playtime, naps, and baths communicates your role of full-time caregiver. The basic idea is to create a sense of a normal life. The child may not have had much predictability in his life previously. You may have to be patient as the child gets used to your structure. It is important that you stay calm, matter-of-fact, and reassuring as you guide him.

Fatigue and ill health. Parenting a child may add zest to life, but the parenting role can also create fatigue and could possibly contribute to health problems or exacerbate existing ones for you. You may want to visit a medical professional for a thorough physical checkup. If you have a health problem, be sure to follow instructions for resolving it.

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Help for dealing with feelings about caregiving

Do you sometimes have one or more of the feelings or situations listed above? You should know that they are normal. It is okay to have them and you are not a bad person because you have them.

It is only through recognizing these feelings that you can exert control over them and thus put them into perspective. If you deny some of these feelings, you might find that the feelings begin to control you and negatively affect your interactions with the child and the child's parents.

Sometimes grandparents and other relatives raising children say they have no time to take care of themselves. They feel that they spend all their time looking after the children and dealing with life's complications. Constantly dwelling on the negative aspects of life may well lead to a decrease in physical energy and an increase in depression. Such conditions make life tougher for the child in care.

Take charge of your physical health. Eat healthy foods, including vegetables, fruits, lean protein, and whole grains. Eat fats and sweets in limited amounts. Drink



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at least six glasses of water daily. Get plenty of exercise that you enjoy, such as walking, swimming, or gardening. Make sure to get enough sleep each night. You not only nurture yourself but also you provide a healthy role model for your child.

Find help to manage your financial situation. Worries about making money stretch through the month take a toll on your mental health. Help in managing finances is available through your county Cooperative Extension office and the agent for family and consumer sciences. The family and consumer sciences agent often plans workshops in budgeting, managing housing costs, and shopping wisely for food and clothing. There is also a useful Web site, Money-Wise: Managing in Tough Times (<http://www2.ca.uky.edu/moneywise/index.htm>), that contains short articles of practical interest to Kentuckians.

Caring for yourself includes accepting all your feelings and thoughts. It also means that you take daily action to improve your health and well-being. Deciding to take charge of your life is not always easy. However, as you take small steps in that direction, it's good to pat yourself on the back. The more in control of yourself you feel, the more mental and emotional energy you will have to enjoy life and pay attention to your child.

Grandparent and relative caregiver groups that offer education and support can be helpful when you feel all alone with your problems. You may want to find a support group to attend, or you might consider volunteering to help create one. Contact your county Cooperative Extension office for assistance in finding or starting an educational support group.

Help Child Deal with Feelings about Parents

Children often need assistance understanding that their parents may be experiencing difficult problems, but they are still loveable people.

Children irrationally assume it is their fault when something goes wrong with their parents. They may see themselves as not being good children and might think they had something to do with creating the problems that landed them in your care.

The fact that their parents are not around may contribute to children idealizing their parents. This fantasizing is a way children try to cope with loss. You may have a difficult balancing act on your hands: You may have to let your child cope through fantasy at the same time that you may resent the parents for not doing their job. At least you can continue to reassure the child that it is not her fault that things are tough.

Find time for rest and recuperation

Sometimes a caregiver's guilt or particular circumstances may lead to the inability to take a break from caregiving. However, it is important for you as a caregiver to take care of yourself. It is important to keep in mind that your child may also benefit from a break. Is there another relative or friend who could keep the child overnight or for a few days so you can get away? With careful planning, both you and your child could look forward to enjoyable new experiences for a short time.

If getting away from home is not an option, you can still plan some time for yourself. The use of day care, preschool, and other programs for children, such as 4-H, might be helpful in allowing you to have some time alone and rest. Here are examples of activities you might enjoy:

- Reading or watching TV
- Exercising regularly
- Making contact with friends and other family members
- Going to church or other community activities

Caregivers who have rested and taken good care of themselves have more patience and better humor when parenting their child.

Stay in the Present with Partner or at Work

Although priorities in your life may have been reordered by the addition of a child to your household, they cannot be forgotten. Make sure to have other things on your to-do list in addition to focusing on your child. If you do not, you may unknowingly begin to resent the child. A grandparenting or relative-caregiving couple should take care of each other. Make sure you leave some time to enjoy your partner.

Handling Child's Concerns about Grandparent Dying

This concern will sometimes be verbalized and sometimes not. It is a common experience for children between the ages of 6 and 10, but may be experienced by all ages.

Children will usually accept and do best with straightforward and simple responses to questions about death. Grandparents and other relative caregivers should be ready to answer. Here are some possible responses:

- “I will take care of you. You can count on me. If anything should happen to me, I’ve arranged for Aunt Mary to step in and take care of you. You will always have a home.”



A grandparenting or relative-caregiving couple should take care of each other. Make sure you leave some time to enjoy your partner.

- “I am not sick and I think I will be here for a long time.”
- “I know you think I am pretty old, but I am not that old and I feel good and healthy.”
- “Even if I get sick sometimes, I generally get well pretty quickly.”
- “I know you sometimes get worried about my not being here or about my dying, but I think I am going to be around a good long time.”

Keep your answer short. A long discussion will only confuse children and contribute to their worrying. If they continue to ask questions, give short, reassuring answers and divert their attention toward some activity, such as helping you with a task.

Conclusion

Studies suggest that the longer grandparents and other relatives raising children continue in their caregiving role, the better their health and general sense of well-being become. They seem to find a balance between caregiving and managing their own lives. They have located helping resources and have made use of them. Best of all, they have learned to recognize the benefits of caring for the children and seeing them grow up. However, they have generally needed ongoing support to be successful. It is

important to recognize, however, that some grandparents or relatives find themselves in difficult financial situations

Remember, if you are not already involved in an educational support group for relatives who are raising children, please consider finding and joining one. Feel free to tell the facilitator of the group topics you would like to discuss. The more your concerns are brought into the open, the more peaceful you will feel and the better you will be able to relate to your loved one, your growing child.

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