



## FEATURE ARTICLE FROM ALWAYS BEST CARE

### Grandfamilies Find New Challenges, Satisfaction

When her son and daughter-in-law had to give up their two-year-old to foster care because they weren't able to care for her, Rhonda flew from Baltimore to Tucson to retrieve her granddaughter. "I didn't hesitate one bit. I had to chuckle to myself that I had just sent my youngest off to college and was relishing being an empty nester and getting to know my new home! Hello new life! My son and daughter-in-law both signed over legal guardianship to me, the judge signed the papers and we flew back home to Baltimore the following day. That Sunday morning we woke up to freezing cold rain. I had no diapers, one change of clothes, no milk, no car seat, no stroller, NOTHING! But I didn't care, it seemed like Christmas morning to me" (from [Raising Your Grandchildren](#)).

Rhonda is one of the growing number of older adults who find themselves being parents again, a phenomenon known as "grandfamilies." A broader term is "kinship caregivers," which refers to care provided for children by relatives other than their parents.

According to the U.S. 2010 Census, more than 2.7 million households consisted of grandparents raising their grandchildren, an increase from the 2000 Census. In fact, the number of children being raised by grandparents or other relatives is higher than those being raised in the foster care system by a ratio of 25 to 1. By keeping children out of foster care, grandfamilies save taxpayers more than \$6.5 billion each year (figures from [Generations United](#)).

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However, more than 60 percent of those grandparents are still in the workforce, and 21 percent are living below the poverty level. Both factors contribute to the challenges of being a parent again. So widespread has kinship care become that the government has created a website, [Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#), with links to benefits and assistance, health and safety resources, data and publications and state resources. For additional information, see sidebar.

#### More Need for Grandfamilies

There are many reasons that more grandparents are becoming involved in raising their grandchildren. "More often than not, there is a correlation between alcohol and drug abuse and neglect on the part of the parents. The parent/s may be mentally ill, incarcerated or simply and unfortunately incapable of caring for their children," reports Raising Your Grandchildren, a website dedicated to helping "guide grandparents and other relatives (kinship parents) in their efforts to raise, parent and educate these children." Other reasons include:

- As divorce rates increase, grandparents often step in to take care of their grandchildren during times of transition or uncertainty.
- Grandparents are younger and healthier than previous generations of grandparents, so they are more able to care for children.

- An increase in the number of single parents, often women, results in many unable to support their child(ren).
- More teenage pregnancies means grandparents are helping when their children can't handle the emotional or financial burden.
- Parents become ill, disabled or die.
- If parental abuse or neglect is found, grandfamilies are seen as a better option than foster care.
- When military children are deployed, grandparents step in.

The impact on older adults raising their grandchildren is often emotionally rewarding but can also be both financially and emotionally difficult.

### **Emotional Issues**

A 60-year-old woman tells of the hardships raising her four grandchildren, including one with Asperger's condition, by herself. Her only source of income is state assistance, food stamps and death benefits from the father of the oldest boy. "There is absolutely nothing extra [money] to do anything for the kids except things that are free," she told Raising Your Grandchildren. "All that to say, it is really hard at this age to be taking on the responsibility of these four kids, but I love them to pieces and wouldn't trade the experience for anything. I have seen the younger three grow and mature and become awesome kids."

Taking on the responsibility of child-rearing at an age that most people consider their leisure years can bring up a lot of emotions. You may feel grief and guilt over the inability of your children to be good parents, anger and resentment at having to step into the parenting role again, stress in trying to balance your life and figure out everything that needs to be done (school, activities, etc.). There's also culture shock in having to deal with a generation, twice removed from you, which is more knowledgeable about technology, for example.

Some children arrive with preexisting problems or risk factors such as abuse, neglect, prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol or loss of parents (due to death, abandonment or incarceration). If the parents are still around, a child can have conflicting loyalties between parents and grandparents.

One of the first sources of stress is being uncertain about where to start when grandchildren first show up. Experts suggest first focusing on basic needs such as a good bed, food and clothing. Contact the children's teachers, doctors and anyone else who has been involved in the children's lives.

Not only can raising children be stressful, it can also be lonely. It's important for grandparents to connect with others for support. Contact friends and family members to see if they can help with daily chores; you can start by putting together a list (for example, drive a child to soccer practice, help with groceries) to nail down what is most needed. Don't be afraid to ask your children and friends for emotional support; be honest about your feelings and how much your life is changing.

Talk to clergy, support groups and social agencies. You can find support groups for grandfamilies through AARP's [Grandparent Support Locator](#) or your state's GrandFacts fact sheet at [www.grandfactsheets.org](http://www.grandfactsheets.org). Many kinship caregivers connect with others via the Internet in online groups such as the [Raising Grandchildren group](#).

As much as you can, maintain a healthy lifestyle with fitness checkups, exercise, a good diet and your favorite relaxation techniques. When you need more assistance than friends and family can give, caregiver respite programs may be available in your area, either through your local government or the Area Agency on Aging.

## Practical Considerations

Unless you have certain legal rights, your children can take your grandchildren back, and you have no recourse. Or, you may not be able to get medical care for them. State laws vary, so it's best to consult with state agencies or a lawyer.

One of the least obtrusive approaches is for parents to give grandparents power of attorney to make specific decisions such as getting medical care or enrolling the child in school. Military parents often use this option when they are deployed.

Beyond that simple permission are more structured legal relationships, meaning the courts (and lawyers) become involved. Starting with less formal options, available choices include (from AARP and Raising Your Grandchildren):

- **Custody:** You are responsible for supporting and providing care for the child. In certain states, a child's parents may still retain some of their rights—even if you have physical custody. A parent can voluntarily relinquish custody of a child through a written legal agreement, or custody can be formally ordered by the court. Having custody does not legally sever other family relationships, as in the case of adoption, and can be reversed at a later time.
- **Guardianship:** If a child is taken away from his parent (or other legal guardian) by the courts, you have the duty to care for a child. In some states, when someone takes guardianship of a child, a parent loses all his rights.
- **Adoption:** When you adopt a child, you have all the rights and responsibilities of a biological parent and all previous legal family ties are severed. The birth parents no longer have any rights. This is least commonly used by grandparents wanting to raise their grandchildren.

Another practical issue for grandparents is health insurance for the children, as well as having their medical records and history. If you are working, you may be able to get your grandchild on your employee policy. Otherwise, the child may qualify for government assistance through free or low-cost Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) or the federal Medicaid program.

## Sources

"Grandparents: As Parents," Colorado State University Extension Service

"Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," [AARP](#)

"Grandparents Raising Grandchildren," [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Raising Your Grandchildren](#)

"Grandparents Raising Grandchildren" [U.S. government](#)

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